

**Study Guide for *Ghosts of Amistad: In the Footsteps of the Rebels*  
by Philip Misevich and Konrad Tuchsherer**

**Background to the Film**

Inspired by Marcus Rediker's book, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (Viking, 2012), the film *Ghosts of Amistad* recounts a dramatic history of resistance to enslavement in the nineteenth century. Its focus is the story of the *Amistad*, a slave vessel that in 1839 aimed to forcibly transport 53 captives from one part of Cuba (Havana) to another (Guanaja), where they were to be forced to serve the island's lucrative sugar industry. During their journey, the captives rose up in rebellion, seized the schooner, sailed it up the coast of the United States, and, after a protracted legal battle, earned their freedom. While the *Amistad* case has received scholarly attention for several decades and was even the focus of a major motion picture (*Amistad*, 1997), western figures and contexts had long defined the story. Little was known of the African dimensions of this important event: who were the *Amistad* captives? From where in Africa did they come? How did the captives' worldviews inform their decision to revolt and the way they organized their campaign for freedom? Put in slightly different terms, how does a centering of the African side of the *Amistad* story affect its significance to world history?

While Rediker's book thoroughly addresses these questions, it became clear that additional information about the *Amistad* could be gathered through on-the-ground fieldwork in Sierra Leone, the modern country from which the majority of the captives originated. Rediker traveled there in 2013 with award-winning filmmaker Tony Buba and a small group of scholars aiming to uncover local perspectives on and memories and sites connected to the *Amistad*. As its title indicates, the film not only reveals new information about the revolt. It also illustrates how Sierra Leone's violent and extractive past – shaped by centuries of enslavement and colonialism – continues to haunt the present.

***Ghosts of Amistad* and History from Below**

*Ghosts of Amistad* has been shaped by and makes contributions to major methodological changes in how historians think about the past. Since its birth as an academic discipline, history has privileged a limited number of voices: those of elite, literate, white, western men. Individuals and groups who did not leave written records or were not in positions of power were generally ignored. The activities of sub-Saharan Africans as a whole were, for example, characterized as recently as the 1960s by a leading Oxford scholar as

“unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe.” Such attitudes left little room in academia for an appreciation of African dynamism.

Yet since that time, the trend has been toward seeing marginalized and exploited communities as the true makers of history. New sources and creative historical methodologies have revealed in striking detail how women, workers, impoverished people, and the enslaved (to offer but a few examples) created vibrant lives and worlds for themselves in the face of severe structural exploitation. This “History from Below” approach has revolutionized how we think, talk, and write about the past.

*Ghosts of Amistad* is a product of this welcome shift in the historical discipline. As a teaching tool, the film aims to provoke questions and discussions about who we place at the center of our narratives and why. It is a challenge – a provocation, even – to teachers and students to move beyond traditional subjects and texts. Film viewers who are familiar with the *Amistad* will note the near total absence from this film of American lawyers and politicians – a sharp contrast with the 1997 motion picture. Instead, the captives themselves are the focus of the story; its sources include everyday Sierra Leoneans with deep local knowledge of the past. The film is therefore a testament to the value of fieldwork and the human sources it privileges. It makes the case that this remarkable story remains etched into the landscape of Sierra Leone and can only be accessed with the help of communities that serve as gatekeepers of the past.

## **The Slave Trade**

The Atlantic slave trade was a dominant feature of European, African, and American societies for three and a half centuries. The era of the slave trade witnessed an estimated 12.5 million captive Africans stripped from their homelands and forced into the holds of 40,000 slaving voyages. Millions more died within Africa in the wars that fueled the slave trade and during marches toward coastal slaving ports and barracoons. Enslaved people who survived the dreaded Middle Passage were often subjected to a second voyage, such as the one the *Amistad* took, during which they were forcibly transported from one American port to another. Loss of human life and the reality of social dislocation were permanent features of this era.

By the time the revolt onboard the *Amistad* took place, the slave trade was in its final few decades of existence. The British government had in 1807 made it illegal for British citizens to participate in transatlantic slave trafficking. Over subsequent decades the British signed treaties with rival European powers to gradually eliminate the legality of the trade. Yet profits remained high enough that slave traders continued to visit Africa

by the thousands. To avoid prosecution for illicit activity, slave voyages became far more clandestine in their operation. Captains obtained false papers that obscured their vessels' origins and intentions. Enslaved people in Africa were increasingly confined to makeshift barracoons hidden in mangrove swamps that were difficult to access and patrol. While the slave trade was once openly organized from the many large European castles that lined the West African coast, this new era was defined by speed, silence, and secrecy.

Few locations more clearly illustrate the shift from the open slave trade to the illicit one than Sierra Leone. As the film indicates, enslaved Africans from Sierra Leone had for centuries passed through Bunce Island, a large British fort that commanded the estuary. Yet in the nineteenth century, primarily Spanish and Cuban slave traders transitioned into to the Gallinas, where they used their knowledge of the local terrain to evade British naval officers. Lomboko, the main slaving center in the Gallinas and the site from which the *Amistad* captives were loaded onto a transatlantic slave vessel, lies hidden on a small island in the shifting waters of the Kerefe River. It is hardly surprising that the scholars who searched for Lomboko over several decades did not find it; such settlements were not built to last. Yet the historical legacy of lost places like Lomboko still haunts the modern world.

### Discussion Questions

*Ghosts of Amistad* raises important considerations about historical interpretation and methodological approaches. Students and teachers may want to consider the following questions to help guide them through the film:

1. Why do you think the history of the *Amistad* revolt and the trans-Atlantic slave trade are not better known by people in the United States?
2. Why do you think the history of the *Amistad* revolt and the trans-Atlantic slave trade are not better known by the people in Sierra Leone?
3. In Sierra Leone, we see two different types of places where captives were held before they were sent on the Middle Passage to the Americas. One is the stone fortress at Bunce Island in the Sierra Leone harbor near Freetown and the other at Lomboko in the mangrove swamps of a remote part of southeastern Sierra Leone. What do we know about the historical context of these different places and how they featured in the trans-Atlantic slave trade?
4. Marcus Rediker is searching for the cultural backgrounds of the Africans who successfully rose up and took control of the *Amistad* and draws attention to the

Poros Society. What is the Poros Society and how did it and other forms of Sierra Leone culture enable the Africans to organize themselves into a successful revolt?

5. What role, if any, did the children have in the uprising onboard the *Amistad*?
6. Rediker attempts to reconstruct the history of the *Amistad* Africans “from below.” What is meant by “history from below”?
7. Rediker says that most of the documentation about the *Amistad* uprising is outside of Sierra Leone. Why is this?
8. If Africans often lack written documents about history, in general how do they document and pass down their histories?
9. In the film, the African philosopher Amadou Hampate Ba is quoted: “When an old African dies, a library burns down.” What does this mean? Can you think of other situations in and out of Africa where this would be true?
10. Historians usually work in archives with old documents. How was information gathered from people in villages, from fishermen, and truck drivers used to try to find the *Amistad* story from the African perspective?
11. If the slave trade was outlawed in 1807, how was it that the *Amistad* Africans taken captive and sold into slavery in 1839?
12. Part of the tragic legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was that some African chiefs and kings sold other Africans into slavery. In the film, King Siaka’s history of collaboration with Spanish slave trader Pedro Blanco, is probed. Why did Africans like King Siaka engage in the slave trade? How is King Siaka remembered today?
13. According to the African elder, Vandi Massaquoi, who Rediker met in the Lomboko slave trade complex, local history asserts that Sengbe and the others rose up while in captivity in Africa, proclaiming that “they would rather die as free men than being taken away in chains as slaves.” Can you think of other people in history who have asserted they would prefer death to being denied their natural rights of liberty and freedom?
14. Historian Arthur Abraham tells us that the consequences of the slave trade will be with us for a long time to come. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
15. Charlie Haffner, the leader of an influential Sierra Leonean performance group, says that “if you want to hide something from an African, just put it in a book.”

What does this mean in the case of *Amistad* history in Sierra Leone? Can you think of other examples in or out of Africa where this is the case?

16. What do you think are some of the challenges of conducting oral history research in Africa? Give some examples from the film to make your case.
17. When meeting chiefs and interviewing local historians, Rediker frequently begins meetings with a “koti,” the Mende word for greeting fee/present. How do you see this symbolic gesture?
18. Taziff Koroma was a Mende linguist who played a significant role in the research and film as an interpreter. In what ways did his role exceed translation?

## **Additional Resources**

### Books

Companion book for film, updated with an epilogue post film production

Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

### On the *Amistad*

Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Arthur Abraham, *The Amistad Revolt: An Historical Legacy of Sierra Leone and the United States* (Washington, DC : U.S. Department of State International Information Programs, 1998); Iyunolu Folayan Osagie, *The Amistad Revolt: Memory, Slavery, and the Politics of Identity in the United States and Sierra Leone* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); David Brion Davis, “The *Amistad* Test of Law and Justice,” in his *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), chap. 1; Benjamin N. Lawrance, *Amistad’s Orphans: An Atlantic Story of Children, Slavery, and Smuggling* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Joseph L. Yannielli, “Dark Continents: Africa and the American Abolition of Slavery,” Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2013.

### On the trans-Atlantic slave trade

Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 2007); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

### On the Mende of Sierra Leone

Kenneth Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone: A West African People in Transition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951, rev. ed. 1967); Sylvia Ardyn Boone, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

### On the Galinhas/Gallinas region of Sierra Leone

Adam Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels: A History of the Galinhas Country (West Africa), 1730–1890* (Wiesbaden, Germany: F. Steiner, 1983); Philip Misevich, *Abolition and the Transformation of Atlantic Commerce in Southern Sierra Leone, 1790s to 1860s* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2019); Vivian Seton, Konrad Tuchscherer, and Arthur Abraham, eds., *The Autobiography of an African Princess: Fatima Massaquoi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

### For children

*Sengbe and the Amistad* (Footsteps series in African-American History) (Petersborough, NH: Cobblestone, 1998); Monica Edinger, *Africa Is My Home: A Child of the Amistad* (Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2013).

### Web resources and primary sources

Slave Voyages website. Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade by David Eltis  
<https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/essays#interpretation/a-brief-overview-of-the-trans-atlantic-slave-trade/introduction/0/en/>

National Archives, *Amistad* primary sources and teaching activities  
<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/amistad>

Library of Congress, *Amistad* primary sources  
<https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohhtml/exhibit/aopart1b.html>

Yale University, Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, *Amistad* primary sources and lesson plans  
<https://glc.yale.edu/amistad-case>

Yale University, Beinecke Library, Drawings of the *Amistad* Prisoners, New Haven  
<https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/collections/highlights/drawings-amistad-prisoners-new-haven>

Famous American Trials: *Amistad* Trials 1839 – 1840 by Douglas O. Linder  
<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/amistad/AMISTD.HTM>

Barber, John Warner. *A History of the Amistad Captives*, 1840

<https://archive.org/stream/ASPC0001874900#page/n1/mode/2up>

Newspapers.com, historical newspaper clippings on *Amistad*

<https://www.newspapers.com/topics/civil-war/amistad-case/>